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*The Influence of the improvements of life
on the moral Principle, considered.*

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S E R M O N

Preached before the
University of Cambridge
JANUARY 30. 1758.

BY
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January 30. 1778.

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THE CHURCH OF CAMBRIDGE

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MDCCLXXVIII.

SERMON, &c.

2 TIM. III. 1. 2.

This know—that in the last days perilous times shall come; for Men shall be Lovers of their own selves.

THE general meaning of these words is too obvious to require any explanation : and the Connection between the Declaration they contain, and the reason upon which that Declaration is founded, is as close as can be between cause and effect. Every one knows what we mean when we say that *perilous times shall come* ; and very few, if any, will be shameless enough to contradict us, if we assert it in consequence of *Mens being Lovers of their own selves*, that is, as we are told in the subsequent verses, in consequence of their being *traiterous, beady, high-minded*, and so on.

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But in order to determine with any precision the Intention of the Apostle in making this Declaration, or to know when we may reasonably expect the *Event* marked out by it (if we are yet to expect it) we must consider the particular Limitation of it to *the last days*.

This know that in the last days perilous times shall come.

By *the last days* in this and other places of the New Testament hath been commonly understood the times of Christianity *collectively* as I may say, and without any reference to the different periods of its duration. The natural and direct tendency of the Christian Religion being to improve the principles of action in Mankind, it has been thought either true and reasonable in itself, or beneficial in its consequences, to persuade Men, that the effect hath been *conformable* though not *proportional* to the cause; that wherever Christianity hath been established, it hath refined the principles, strengthened the influence, and extended the practice of moral virtue; and that not only *at first* and in its original institution, but that it continues to do so even to this day: that as Religion is better understood, the practice of
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it is more universally attended to; in short, that the World grows *better*, as it grows *wiser*.

One of the * *ablest* Writers of the last Century appeared an open Advocate for this Doctrine, and to remove the impediment, which the words, under our present consideration, threw in his way, he hath glossed them over after such sort as neither gives strength to his cause, nor does credit to his judgement.

A † *modern* Writer (from whom no good Man can differ without pain) endeavouring to revive the same doctrine, hath indeed handled it with more caution. His System inclined him to believe it true in speculation, but as to the fact, he confesseth himself in doubt. Notwithstanding which, he hath loaded the contrary opinion with ‡ *consequences*, which, if true, must render a defence of it *impious*, and even, if false, very *invidious*. It would not only exceed the *bounds*, but ill suit the *occasion* of this Discourse, to examine minutely what he hath advanced on this head, but I cannot help observing on his calling

* Lord Clarendon. *Essays Moral and Divine*; dated *Montpelier*; 1670.

† Dr. Law. *Considerations on the Theory of Religion*, Part 2d Ed. 3. *Cambridge*, 1755.

‡ Pag. 234.

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his own the *charitable* side of the question, that where the object of pursuit is *Truth*, we ought to be extremely cautious how we suffer even the *best* and most *exalted* affections to direct our Judgement, lest we be found at length to have drawn consequences from facts not ascertained, and inferences from opinions not understood.

For my own part, I profess myself among those who think that the World, or, to speak with more precision, the state of morality in the world *degenerates*, daily. By morality, I mean, *in general*, a certain principle of action, founded on the will of God, and operating in the minds of Men by its own proper Influence. And, in my present Idea of the world, I exclude such parts of it as are now emerging from absolute Barbarism: for the present inquiry extends not to such, as it relates only to that influence which the improvements of Life and the more perfect knowledge of Religion are found to have upon the *moral principle*.

The mistakes of every Writer on this subject have arisen from not attending to the necessary Distinction between the *Rule* and the *Conformity to it*. In order to estimate the state of morality
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in the world in different Ages, they have attended only to the *Practice* of Mankind and from it inferred the *Principle*, without considering that the direct Tendency of almost every improvement of life, so far as it affects the mutual intercourse between Man and Man, is to bring about the Practice of morality *without the Principle*, or in other words, rather to supply the want of real virtue than actually to produce it.

It cannot be denied, that, in many instances, the improvements of life have so far enlightened the minds of Men, that they readily discern the connection between certain moral duties and their own private Interest : in others, where the connection is not so visible, Laws have been enacted, and Men obliged to the observance of them under Pains and Penalties : and upon the whole, as Men become more civilized, the practice of morality is better secured, Outrages of every kind seldomer committed, and men converse with each other upon better and safer terms. But in the mean time, it is I fear equally true, that these same improvements are so far from having strengthened the *principles* of morality, that they have in fact weakened and im-

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paired them: for the ultimate end of morality being private Happiness, the Bulk of Mankind will be always found to cultivate the *Mean*, so far *only* as they think it productive of the *End*: and, as I said before, the direct tendency of almost every improvement of life being to produce *artificial* virtue, the *End* becomes answered in a great measure *without* the *Mean*, and the *real* Sanctions of morality lose their influence, as Men find them, or *fancy* that they find them less conducive to private good.

Let us briefly consider the effect, which *Learning*, and in consequence of that a more *perfect* knowledge of *Religion*, may reasonably be supposed to have had upon the world: if any of the improvements of life have assisted the cause of morality, these seem to lay the fairest claim to it.

The argument in favour of Learning usually runs thus. The more you advance in Learning, the more perfectly you understand the principles of Religion, and to use the *words* and the *authority* of a * most excellent Writer, "*the bigger you advance in Faith, the more skilfully you bal-*

* Dr. Warburton. Sermons, Vol. 2. p. 208.

" *lance*

"*lance your Appetites and Affections.*" But then, as the same Writer subjoins, it too often happens, that "*the more you advance in Science, the more you inflame those appetites, and render them intractable.*" If this be true, with regard to useful and real Knowledge, in which *very few*, in any age, have made any *great* Advances, and if we consider farther the infinite damage and discredit, which Religion as well as Morality hath received from superficial Knowledge and pretended Learning; there will remain no room to doubt, that the Advantages obtained by the former are considerably over-ballanced by the Injuries of the latter, and that tho' Morality hath gained on the side of *Truth*, She hath suffered more from the prevalent and more active Spirit of *Error*:

But let it be remembered, that I am not considering the *natural* tendency of things, but their *usual* result. My Design is neither to decry the *merit*, nor to undervalue the *Advantages* of Learning. Far from me be a Thought so groundless and unwarrantable in itself, so injurious to those many examples of its use and excellence, before whom I stand, and so derogatory from

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the word of God, which upon every improvement of our knowledge appears in growing Majesty and Splendor.

We may perhaps illustrate and confirm the truth, for which I am contending, by considering the effects which the improvements of *civil Government* are found to produce on the moral principle. And to make the Application at once as *clear* and as *complete* as possible, let us consider *our own* † Nation and its *present* situation.

The Idea of perfection in government is *two-fold*, as it may be considered either respecting the supreme *Magistrate*, or the *People*. The *former* considers it as perfect, when he is enabled by it to keep the People in due subjection to himself, and in due subordination to each other. The *latter*, when their Persons and Properties are effectually secured by the Laws, as well against the mutual Injuries of each other as against the In-
croachments of the supreme Magistrate. The

† By the way we may observe, concerning the Progress of civil Liberty in this Nation, that our Forefathers instead of moderately *cultivating* seem to have *forced* the Root of Liberty. Hence the fruits produced were indeed plentiful, fair, and in full Proportion; at the same time inferior in *Flavor*, and probably earlier in *decay* than if ripened by the slower but more effectual influence of Nature.

Want

Want of this just Ballance ^{or} *Æquipoise* produc-
ed that horrid *Murder*, in deprecation of the
guilt of which, we have been humbling our-
selves in the sight of God: and the *Obtaining*
of it hath constituted that perfect state of *civil*
Liberty which we now enjoy; or to speak more
properly, which is now *in our possession*. A little
Attention to the consequences of this *Liberty*
will convince us, that Men are equally restless in
the possession as under the want of it, and that
as soon as they find themselves relieved from the
grievances of Government, they begin to murmur
at its just Demands. From whence can we infer
that notorious contempt of Law and defiance of
Discipline; or that total neglect of the public
Welfare, which not only disgraceth but *endanger-*
eth the present times, but that Men, *drunk with*
Liberty, have forgot the principles of *Submission*;
and by being secure in *private* property have lost
every Sense of Duty to the *Public*.

Let it be sufficient to speak thus *generally*; for
to distinguish *particularly* and to delineate ex-
actly the characteristic Principles of a Nation in
any point of Time, *not already past*, requires a
more *able* Head, a more *discerning* Eye, and a

more *correct* Hand than falls to the Lot of *common* Men : and a *late Attempt* of this sort may have convinced us, how much easier it is to describe the external Symptoms of Disorders, than to give a scientific Account of their internal Causes. The *Nurse* may in some respects be qualified for the former, the latter can only be expected from the *Physician*.

If what I have hitherto advanced be *true*, and I think myself warranted by universal Experience and by every rule of Judgement to conclude that it is true ; if the general Constitution of things be such, that every improvement of life engendereth Corruption, insomuch that it may be *universally* affirmed, that whatever is most essentially good in itself is constantly productive of the greatest evil ; if the Annals of former times and the Observation of the present bear testimony, that as public Communities *advance* in happiness they *decline* in virtue, and *degenerate* in principle as they *refine* in manners ; we are, I think, arrived at the *conclusion* sought after : and if we proceed one step farther, and according to the same rule of judgement assert, that the Influence of the Christian Religion itself on the
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minds of Men is in its *effect*, though not in its *nature*, a *decreasing* Quantity ; it will then appear highly probable, that by *the last days* in the Text, we are to understand the later Ages of Christianity ; and that there is not the least ground to think with the noble Writer, before hinted at, *that those perilous times are passed already.*

But let us inquire, whether the Scriptures will afford us any information in this particular.

And here, not to multiply instances, we have a most *remarkable* Declaration of our Saviour himself, which if compared with the Text, will, I think, determine the meaning of the Apostle, and beyond contradiction evince the truth, which I have been endeavouring to establish. Speaking of the times immediately preceding his second coming to judge the world, he hath given them this distinguishing mark or Characteristic. “ *And, then, because Iniquity shall abound the Love of many shall wax cold.*” Whoever will compare this passage with the words of the Text must conclude, that the Apostle, in writing the latter had the former in view ; that as both the Expression and the Sentiment are virtually the same,

same, the Times referred to must likewise be the same in both.

But we are not yet arrived at the *full* meaning of these words; for it is plain that the Apostle intended that they should be understood as relating to the then *present* State of things. We assert therefore, that the fact spoken of was then true; and in consequence of what we have already proved we assert farther, that it is equally true if applied to each succeeding age of Christianity, which, as we have before observed, hath this in common with every positive Institution, that its *general* influence on the minds of Men, *hath* been, and probably *will* be, during the present System of things, a *decreasing* Quantity.

By considering the Expression in this light, we find it both *true* in itself, and attended with this farther Propriety, that it *favoured* an Opinion, which universally prevailed among the first Converts to Christianity, and which we have great reason to believe was most highly *useful*, if not absolutely *necessary* to its first Establishment, namely, that it was to be a *Dispensation of very short Duration*. It is most probable, that many, induced by this common Expectation, embraced

embraced the Gospel who, in the true Spirit of Disappointment, became afterwards its greatest Enemies. And on this account, we find Saint *Peter* (in his second Epistle) opposing the opinion itself, but yet with such Delicacy and Address as rather to obviate the Conclusions drawn from it, than to diminish the belief that it was true: for, instead of answering the Question, *where is the promise of his coming?* he refers them to their own partial and imperfect notions of the Deity, exhorting them at the same time *to look for and to hasten to it*; and instead of fully explaining those Passages of Saint *Paul*, which, by intimating the *immediate* coming of Christ, had occasioned the *Apostacy* of some and were the ground of *Discontent* in others, He chooseth rather to acknowledge, "*that there were in them some things hard to be understood, which they that were unlearned, and unstable, wrested, as they did the other Scriptures, to their own Destruction.*"

Thus therefore, by Events placed not only beyond the *Reach*, but contrary to the *Expectation* of human Foresight, we see the common course of things bearing testimony to the *truth* of the sacred writings, and doing honour to that
wisdom,

wisdom, under whose immediate influence they were written. And tho' the consideration of these things, when viewed thro' the Medium of *false Science*, may strike some men with *Terror*, and some with Passions less becoming, yet am I sure, that if we apply them to the *unerring* light of the Gospel, we shall find them both consistent with our Nature, and agreeable to every Expectation, that can be *reasonably* derived from the *Justice*, the *Wisdom* or the *Goodness* of the Almighty.

I shall now make a short Application of this Discourse to the occasion of the present Solemnity:

If then it hath been proved, that, in the ordinary course of things, the improvements of life are *injurious* to moral virtue; and if it needs no proof, that the Decay of moral virtue must be destructive of public Love, or that the Loss of public Love must be the End of public Safety; let each of these considerations have their proper influence on our minds. Let the blessings we enjoy from the improvements of life (greater these, than *any other* Nation under Heaven) at length

length awaken our Gratitude to God : let us remember, that new Temptations to our Virtue arise out of every of these blessings ; that our Caution therefore in the Use should be commensurate to our Pleasure in the Enjoyment. Let the decay of moral virtue and, in consequence of that, the contempt of public Love beget in us at once a Sense of *Shame* and a Sense of *Danger*. The History of this day may convince us how *short* the Interval sometimes is between the internal peace of a nation and all the Horrors of civil confusion ; between the regular and uncontroverted order of Government, and its total Dissolution. And though the Dangers that now threaten us are of a *different* nature, proceeding not from the *Want*, but from the *Abuse*, I had almost said from the *Excess* of Liberty, we have reason to think, that the Tendency of them is *more* pernicious to the public good, inasmuch as their *Causes* are less attended to, the *Operations* of those causes are more certain, and their *Effects* more difficult either to be withstood or to be removed.

But *secondly* : if the Prevalence of *self love* be not only a sign of *perilous times*, but the fore-

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runner of that *dreadful Period*, when every means of Amendment shall cease, and every effort of Repentance prove unavailable, it becometh us highly both as *Men* and as *Christians* to consider our present Situation. God grant, that we may do it both sincerely and effectually! In a word; — though we know not how long the *Bridegroom* may tarry, yet as we are equally ignorant how speedily he may come, let us no longer *foolishly* presume upon his Delay, but *having our Loyns girded about and our Lights burning, let us continually look for and hasten to his coming!*

F I N I S.